

Social Media Inquiry – Responses to Mr Wallace and Ms Templeman

Questions from Mr Wallace

Question 1.

Do you think that Social Media Companies owe their users, participants and content creators a duty of care?

Social media companies indeed owe a duty of care to users, participants, partners, and content creators who interact with their platforms. These companies operate to generate profit, often through user engagement, advertising, and data monetisation. Their algorithms, designed to enhance user engagement, may expose individuals to harmful content, especially minors and vulnerable groups, leading to privacy, legal, and ethical concerns. The platforms are criticised for inadequate responses to inappropriate content, further exacerbating risks for young users. There's a pressing need for stricter regulation to ensure these companies are held accountable for user safety. Content creators and partners also share responsibility, as they benefit from user engagement. APC advocates for robust regulation to classify and restrict harmful content, ensuring the wellbeing of younger users.

Question 2.

You recommend a national ban on smartphone use for children under 18, suggesting that only non-smartphones with voice and text features should be allowed.

- **How would you propose the government enforce this ban, especially considering the widespread availability of smartphones and children's potential access to them through other means (e.g. borrowing others'), and their use for navigation, emergency contact, and education?**

APC supports a national ban on smartphone use for children under 18, allowing only basic phones with voice and text features. Enforcement would be challenging, but achievable through new laws, public education campaigns, and a societal shift in attitude toward children's smartphone use. The ban would involve penalties for parents or children found violating it, and the promotion of alternative activities, such as outdoor play and developing other skills.

Smartphones are not essential for children's navigation, emergencies, or education. Flip phones can handle emergency calls, and libraries can provide internet access with parental controls. Digital literacy programs would help children learn to use technology safely as they mature. Enforcement would take time but, with widespread parental support, the ban could become the new norm.

Question 3.

How should age verification systems involve parental consent or oversight?

APC advocates for a national ban on smartphones for children under 18, emphasising the need for age-appropriate digital literacy programs. These should be introduced before children take on digital responsibilities, starting around age 12, focusing on online safety, protecting personal information, and avoiding scams. Schools should provide controlled environments for learning these skills, such as phishing simulations for students aged 15-16, without exposing them to real risks. Early education should focus on basic computer skills, avoiding social media and harmful online content. APC stresses that preparing children for the digital world responsibly, without premature exposure to its dangers, is key to their future safety.

Question 4.

How should age verification systems involve parental consent or oversight?

APC strongly supports robust age-verification systems to prevent underage access to social media. One option could involve requiring all smartphone users (18 and older) to register their phones with a government system/regulator using AI-driven facial recognition, ensuring their age is verified. This system could be implemented through software updates for existing phones and built into new phones as a standard feature during setup, preventing operation until registration is complete.

Question 5.

Do you have any thoughts about expanding age verification and regulation to online gaming and streaming platforms?

APC acknowledges that many of the dangers associated with social media, such as exposure to inappropriate content and interactions with strangers, are equally prevalent in online gaming. Children often engage in conversations with individuals they believe are friends, unaware of potential risks from predators or harmful interactions. Additionally, online gaming can be highly addictive, impacting children's mental health and hindering their development.

APC advocates expanding age verification and regulation to include online gaming and streaming platforms, applying the same robust measures proposed for social media. This would ensure that children are protected across all digital environments, fostering safer interactions and minimising risks. A unified approach to regulating all digital platforms is essential to safeguarding children's online experiences and promoting healthy digital habits.

Question 6.

Your submission highlights the need for a cultural shift to delay smartphone and social media use.

What government-led initiatives or policy changes would you recommend to influence this kind of cultural change?

To encourage a cultural shift, APC advocates for government-led initiatives that promote healthier offline activities and delay children's exposure to digital platforms. This would require a widespread public awareness campaign, including television ads that educate society on the risks of social media, particularly for children, and emphasise the need for responsible parenting. Advertisements targeting children that promote apps or social media engagement should be eliminated, and instead, campaigns should focus on the dangers of digital addiction and online predators.

The government should also provide support for parents, offering resources and education on how to enforce digital boundaries and resist children's demands for smartphones and social media access. Schools must be integral to this effort, committing to digital-free zones and reinforcing the message of delayed digital use. Additionally, stronger regulations on social media companies are needed to protect children and prevent harmful content exposure.

This initiative would establish new norms for future generations, ensuring that children grow up in healthier environments with proper guidance around technology. While some children may still access social media illicitly, the goal is to make such behaviour uncommon and socially discouraged, much like underage smoking or drinking. APC's position is clear: the risks posed by smartphones and social media to young people's mental health and development must be addressed through comprehensive government policies, age restrictions, and education.

Question from Ms Templeman

Question 7.

A number of young people and their parents have raised with me the positive opportunities for social media where a young person has, for instance, neurodiversity or they identify as queer, are seeking support for a mental illness including eating disorders, have a particular interest or hobby, or live remotely or regionally, or are isolated in some way.

- (i) What impact do you think an age ban on social media will have on young people who use it to connect with others in a positive way?**
- (ii) What would you suggest is put in place as an alternative for those particular young people?**

APC acknowledges that while social media can offer positive connections, particularly for marginalised or isolated youth, the evidence overwhelmingly shows that the risks to children and young people outweigh the benefits. Despite some safe usage, many children engage in inappropriate behaviours or bypass parental controls, often with harmful consequences that parents discover too late.

We recognise the need for alternatives and recommend creating safe, moderated online communities or specialised support networks tailored to young people's needs. These could provide the positive connections social media currently offers but in a safer, controlled environment. Children should access the internet under adult supervision, exploring interests via websites or attending in-person events where parents are involved, ensuring both safety and social engagement.

If a social media ban is implemented, it will be crucial to reintroduce traditional ways of accessing information, such as community centres, libraries, or local health clinics. This will help young people stay connected and informed without the risks associated with social media. Furthermore, focusing on offline activities, such as hobbies, sports, and face-to-face interactions, will promote healthier, more meaningful connections.